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WASHINGTON POST
26 DECEMBER 1981

What Do We Do If the Russians Did Try to Kill the Pope?

By Harry Gelman

THE ARREST LAST month in Rome of a Bulgarian government airline official on charges of direct involvement in the 1981 attempt to assassinate the pope has introduced a poisonous new element into the Western relationship with the Soviet Union — an element that could also further divide the NATO alliance.

This arrest has suddenly made respectable suspicions that had previously seemed irresponsible: that the Bulgarian regime had manipulated the Turkish terrorists who attempted to kill the pope; and that behind the Bulgarian government, the most closely con-

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trolled Soviet satellite, necessarily stood the Soviet KGB, its chairman in 1981 — Yuri Andropov — and the Brezhnev Politburo.

Now it has become plausible to offer a new conjecture to explain the apparently motiveless attack on the pope: that the Brezhnev regime in its final years had embraced not only terrorism but assassination, and had sought through intermediaries to remove the man it identified as one of the main causes of the deterioration of the Soviet position in Poland. (In May 1981, when the assassination attempt occurred, the Soviets' problems in Poland had reached their most desperate state.)

This hypothesis, if accepted, would require a basic revision of assumptions long held in the West about the Soviet regime. Until now it has been commonly believed that the Politburo is fundamentally cautious, reluctant to accept serious risks, disinclined to take "adventurist" actions, and particularly averse to involvement in the assassination of major

Western public figures — not on moral grounds, but because assassinations might have drastic and unpredictable consequences.

If these assumptions were incorrect, then what criteria are the Soviets now using to judge the risks and benefits of different kinds of international behavior? Has the threshold of acceptable risk now been raised? Do the Soviets now calculate that the deterioration of Western morale and the growth of Soviet military power have gone far enough to impart a margin of safety to actions previously considered too dangerous?

moderation, but the relative passivity of the Polish church in recent months is a reaction to the regime's success in supressing Solidarity, not to the attack on the pope.

And it is difficult to imagine that the Soviets could put so high a value on the intimidation of the West as to intend a Soviet role to be widely suspected. They cannot yet have so low an opinion of the West as to think the adverse consequences of such suspicions to be trivial.

If this explanation is not accepted, then the questions I have posed about the adequacy of the Soviet motive and the clumsiness implicit in the direct use of Bulgarians have not yet been answered. Nevertheless, if the Italian accusations against the Bulgarians stand up, the chain of circumstantial evidence implicating the Soviet leadership is grave indeed.

The Turkish killer Agca is believed to have visited Bulgaria for some time in 1980 after he had murdered a Turkish editor and escaped from a Turkish prison. It seems unlikely that the Bulgarian leadership — and the Soviets — were unaware of this. If the Bulgarian airline official Antonov, and the two Bulgarian embassy employees alleged to have been involved with him in the plot to kill him Pope, are indeed guilty, then it is difficult to believe that the Bulgarian government was not deeply involved. It is equally difficult to imagine a private motive for three members of the Bulgarian intelligence service to organize this crime. And, it is even harder to imagine that the Bulgarian leadership could remain ignorant of a matter of this gravity.

It is hardest of all to envision the Bulgarians plotting the pope's assassination without Moscow being fully aware of what was happening. Bulgaria has always had more intimate ties with the U.S.S.R. (and, indeed, with czarist Russia before it) than any other country. Its language and

Second: Could the Soviets be such bunglers as to have allowed the Bulgarians, so closely identified with themselves, such a direct and visible role in assisting Agca?

Third: Is it credible that the Soviets thought they could actually solve their Polish problem by eliminating the Polish pope? Or that they could get such significant benefit from his removal that assassinating him was worth all the attendant risks?

It has been suggested that the Soviets' intention was to dampen the fires in Poland; that the conduct of the Polish church since the assassination attempt shows that it has indeed been intimidated; and that the Soviet leaders also wished through this action to intimidate the West generally, and therefore were willing to allow unprovable suspicions to be directed at them.

This explanation is not convincing. The Soviets and the Jaruzelski regime have indeed wished to intimidate the Polish bishops into accom-

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